

Higher education and development: whose public good? (0057)

This paper considers contrasting approaches to the public good, argues for a normative human development perspective so that the 'who' in 'whose public good' are the citizens of a country and also global others. This is illustrated in relation to curriculum. Even acknowledging that there are no guarantees that graduates will choose to act for the public good, this does not negate the educational aim of providing opportunities for realizing their potential to 'be and do' in this way. Finally, it requires a perspective that enables the advantaged to understand themselves as participants in collective civil society struggles to make all lives go better (De Swaan et al 2001).

Universities make valuable public contributions: preparing graduates for professional practice, advancing social mobility, innovating in technology and culture, and informing the public sphere and preparing graduates to participate in it (Calhoun 2006). Yet missing from many accounts of universities and the public good is a normative commitment to reducing injustice at home and globally. How might universities contribute to a public good which is national but must also transcend this boundary to pay attention to inequalities within and across countries? Drawing on the work of Sen and Nussbaum in particular, and starting from the point that human development is global in its reach and responsiveness, the paper argues that the public good be similarly conceptualised. The approach opens up thinking about how universities ought to contribute to societies which value creating capabilities for all, and a public culture and graduate ethic of public service that places human dignity and the alleviation of suffering at its core. This 'public good' is more than an abstract idea; it requires engagement with capability deprivation, bringing about improvements in what individuals are able to be and do to reduce injustice wherever possible.

Approaches to the public good

1. Economy focus

The first approach is economic growth focused; university education is another tradable good which is aimed at developing national wealth. Marginson (2007) notes that while a globalised higher education system can produce significant public goods such as the sharing of knowledge, cultural exchange and increased tolerance, there is also the problem of a brain drain from developing countries. Although academic mobility is now a feature of study and work in global conditions, the issue turns on the unidirectional traffic of skill and talent from the South to the North. It is further bolstered by a technology of international league tables, status and competition which value only some things that universities do, and which implicitly relegates those who do not feature in league tables to second class status. This reductionist public good expels the poor, poorer countries, and the ethical-global from public policy (even accepting contested views in any one country about the fate of universities). Where only some parts of society benefit from a stronger economy, notably business and industry, others fail to participate effectively in the labour market or university education. Within individual countries there can be significant losers and growing inequalities (OECD 2008).

2. Human well-being focus

By contrast a human development (Haq 2003, Nussbaum 2011, Sen 2009) perspective foregrounds both economy and society; human well-being, equality, justice (local and global) and the sustainability of democratic societies are the aims. Graduates as 'other-regarding' agents take on obligations to develop the capabilities of all citizens to participate fully, asking what we should do to help each other in defending or promoting freedoms. The good of others is not a constraint on our own good, but integral to it. Genuinely global public goods inflect towards reducing injustice and realise Marginson's (2007) essential domain of communicative association: 'the right to speak, and

the conduct of dialogue on the basis of honesty and of mutual respect' situated within and across universities characterized by 'relationships grounded in justice, solidarity, compassion, cosmopolitan tolerance and empathy for the other'(p128).

Operationalizing the public good educationally

According to Nussbaum (2011) education must train people to be capable of leading a reflective life; to be aware of the society in which they live; to develop a critical capacity to judge that society; and to lead a life that they have consciously chosen. We should not underestimate the importance of this for all societies - to freedoms in civil society and the quality of a democracy. This paper outlines two instructive examples. In the first from South Africa a vice-chancellor reports on the serious effects when university education fails to develop the capabilities that democracy requires in order to flourish. By way of contrast in an elite English university, students in history are developing the capabilities that form aware and responsible citizens. At stake is a university education which fosters our ability to see ourselves as 'practical reasoners', respecting the humanity of all fellow human beings, no matter where they are born, what social class they inhabit, their gender or ethnic origin (Nussbaum, 2011). The paper then sketches a transformative curriculum with dimensions of: human development aims, indicative multi-dimensional capabilities, curriculum knowledge, pedagogies that align what is taught with how it is taught, and graduate public-good functioning achievements.

Does human development and capabilities go far enough?

Finally the paper touches on whether human development and capabilities provides grounds for collective change. It addresses the critique of Sen that he does not address collective struggles (e.g. Carpenter 2010, Dean 2009, Feldman and Gellert 2006). However, while he does not tell us how to go from A to B, or that society B is in all respects better than society A, he does provide resources to think well about whether a decent life is available to all, and further attaches importance (often overlooked by critics) to core 'instrumental freedoms' as the conditions for creating capabilities. Feldman and Gellert (2006) concede the possibilities in Sen's approach to public reasoning, finding an acknowledgement of the importance of collective action and resistance in efforts to realize deliberative democratic practice, which provides the associational conditions of possibility for redressing inequality.